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Leaks and Official Secrets

LONDON—"Leaking." Premier James Callaghan once explained to a commission of inquiry, "is what you do and briefing is what I do."

This splendid distinction, worthy of Lewis Carroll, is still the most prescient summary of the eternal brouhaha that has arisen here again.

Callaghan himself has just given us a neat demonstration of the difference. He had let it be known that he will not tolerate any reform of the Official Secrets Act, that superb defense against open government, which can in theory jail for two years any luckless civil servant who leaks or any luckless journal-

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ist who receives an unpublished index of wages for dustmen in Ealing. What the prime minister was doing on this occasion was briefing, even if he read from a cabinet minute. He is one of the self-authorizing few—a class not defined in law—who can tell anyone anything.

But this same Callaghan has worked himself up into a lather because somebody else in government gave Frank Field, director of the Child Poverty Action Group, minutes to six cabinet meetings that showed how Callaghan's government killed a promised welfare plan. Indeed, the prime minister is so upset he is now reversing his briefing persona and publicly saying perhaps the Act should be reformed after all. He does not, however, make clear whether his "reform" would tighten or loosen its fearsome grip.

Callaghan has every reason to be furious. The minutes reveal that he repudiated one of Labor's most solemn pledges, to lift the income of families below the poverty line. Even worse, the documents show that Callaghan and Denis Healey, the able Chancellor of the Exchequer, tricked their own colleagues to get their assent.

Callaghan is pictured citing a non-existent poll of Labor MPs to support his position; Healey is seen telling union leaders that the cabinet is firmly against the welfare plan and then telling the cabinet that the union chiefs want it postponed. This is the sort of thing a Lyndon Johnson would have admired and is precisely the inside view of government Britons almost never get.

"Utterly reprehensible," cried Callaghan when Field published a summary of the minutes in the weekly New Society. Callaghan promptly turned loose the nation's top civil servant, Sir Douglas Allen, chief of the Home Civil Service, to find the leaky culprit.

Sir Douglas, as expected, did not. Field told him it would be "morally reprehensible" to blow the whistle on his sources. The government is so embarrassed by the whole affair it will not pursue Field further, but Scotland Yard will now take over where Sir Douglas left off.

Just to rub it in, Field said he gets leaked government documents all the time, frequently in a shopping basket. That encouraged the chiefs of the National Council for Civil Liberties and National Association for Mental Health to say they did too.

Callaghan's anger over the leaked minutes was in sharp contrast to his restraint over the surfacing of a much deadlier confidential document. This was a report on Asian immigrants that was given to and exploited by right-wing leader Enoch Powell. It was followed almost at once by violent outbreaks against Asian women in at least three English towns.

The report by Donald Hawley, a senior Foreign Office official, asserted there was no limit to the Asians Britain must take in and that large numbers were coming in by fraud. As a piece of research, the document is highly suspect. It did, however, offer one genuine point: the fact that Asians here legitimately can bring in fiances from the subcontinent, and this makes it difficult to fix precisely the extent of Britain's responsibility.

The paper was dynamite in the hands of Powell, a nationalist MP who now sits in the House of Commons with the Protestant hardliners from Ulster. Powell, who first attained fame in this field by predicting rivers of blood would flow, read out the key portions and predicted violence would soon follow. It was apparently a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But there was no outburst of indignation from Callaghan over this leak. He assigned an ambassador who was home for consultation to look into it and nothing more has been heard of him.

That was hardly surprising. As Home Secretary at the time of Powell's river-of-blood speech, Callaghan imposed the first slowdown on the flow of eligible Asians. (This is not a very large group.

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